

**if you lead, i will follow**

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# **if you lead, i will follow**

by [qin\\_ling](#)

## Summary

Maverick and Iceman stare at each other a lot. Goose despairs.

Or; Goose is the best wingman.

## Notes

help i'm in top gun hell

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It starts on the very first day, during orientation, back when Goose was young and naive and had no idea just how big of a problem this would eventually become. Back in a dimly-lit room foggy and acrid with cigarette smoke; back when Goose notices out of the corner of his eye that Maverick is no longer facing the board.

He loves Maverick, really, he does, but that's bold, and *stupid*, when you're sitting front row to a commanding officer clearly very invested in his own speech. Goose elbows him.

To his credit, Maverick barely flinches. He looks forward again, his face a perfect reflection of innocence and attentiveness.

Viper strides down the aisle, still talking, something about weapons and spears and the elite... like a well-oiled machine, everyone turns to track him—everyone, except for one. Blond and pale-eyed and blank as stone, a pen spinning deftly between his fingers. He's staring at Maverick, clear as day; at Maverick, who is just as clearly staring back.

Quick as a whip, Iceman flashes a smile.

This time, Maverick doesn't need urging to face back front. There's an odd expression on his face, one that Goose hasn't seen in years.

Jesus. Goose hopes Carole doesn't mind the no-eyebrow look, 'cause he's pretty sure his just catapulted straight up to space.

Weird as that experience was, he doesn't really think much of it afterward. He's thrilled to be here, and Maverick is, too; you got your naval aviators, and then you got your naval aviators brilliant enough to be sent to TOPGUN. The top 1%, as Viper so succinctly claimed. Whether they would've got here if Cougar didn't bug out was irrelevant, 'cause they're here now.

But the thing about being a naval aviator is that word spreads like cancer. There aren't many of them, see, which means everyone either knows or knows of everyone-fucking-else. And it's usually the dumb shit that spreads first, because that's what boys in the Navy do—get up to dumb shit. Like snapping a photo of a MiG in an inverted Tomcat.

Okay, sue him. Goose is proud of that.

In the low light of the O Club, Iceman's smile is movie-star white and absolutely killer. He's right up in Maverick's face, the entire tall line of him slanted forward as casual and graceful and menacing as a lion, personal space be damned.

In comparison, Maverick looks like a cardboard cutout you'd find at the mall. Stiff as a board, leaned back against the bar.

Maverick doesn't *do* stiff. He's a hurricane of energy and suave confidence condensed in a fierce, compact package; he's the life of the party, undeterred by hearsay and gossip and his own reputation. He's fake it till you make it, till he *does* make it, no one the wiser.

It's Slider who breaks the staredown. Goose catches his split second look of bewilderment before his brow smooths into indifference. "You must've solo-ed under a lucky star, huh? First the MiG, and then you guys slide up into Cougar's spot."

Now wait a minute. "We didn't slide into Cougar's spot—it was ours, okay?"

Slider shrugs. "Yeah, well, some pilots wait their whole careers to see a MiG up close. Guess you guys are lucky and famous."

"No, you mean notorious." Iceman throws back a shot. Reaches past Maverick to set it with a thump on the bartop, still smiling, his voice thick with laughter. "I'll see you later."

Maverick watches them go. Goose watches him watch them go; thinks, *You've got to be shitting me*. "Mav? Earth to Mav."

"Hm? Yeah," says Maverick, finally turning back around, mouth twisted in a crooked grin, giving nothing away.

Oh, but Goose knows better. "What the hell was that?"

Maverick blinks, then laughs. He clinks their bottles together, and droplets of condensation splatter onto their crisp summer whites. "Aw, Goose, don't worry about it," he says. "Just scoping out the competition, you know the drill. We'll have a good time."

Despite himself, Goose can't help the fondness welling up in his breast. Worrisome as Maverick can be, he's still Goose's best friend. He raises his bottle.

"Always," he says.

Always, his ass.

"He's a jackass," Maverick snarls, shoving his flight suit into his locker like it's personally offended him. His banging and clanging echoes throughout the empty space like a one-man percussion ensemble. Nice acoustics. "All up on his high horse like he's better than everyone. We'll show him."

("Better luck next time," Iceman says, snapping his gum and shutting his locker, and Goose catches Maverick's hands clench briefly before Maverick whirls around. Grins, teeth bared and fire in his eyes.

"Don't rest too hard on your laurels there, Kazansky. I'll ("We'll!" calls Goose) be leaving you in the dust before you know it."

Iceman returns the smile, sharp as a dagger and just as mean. "Better show up with *actions*, then, Maverick, not just words.")

"I know," says Goose, hanging his own flight suit with significantly more care. He resists the urge to sigh. "I believe you. We'll do better next time, I know we will."

“I *know* it was stupid,” says Maverick. Thankfully, his frenetic energy is already subsiding. “I didn’t need him to say it.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Goose, tiredly.

“What’s his problem, anyway?” Maverick slaps a hand on his locker, the other on his hip. Head bowed. “He flies like a fucking robot. No creativity, no finesse. He overthinks everything! You think when you’re in the middle of a dogfight you have *time* to think?”

Goose pats him on the shoulder and tries to keep his features sympathetic. Did he ever talk about Carole this much? If so, he has some apologies to make.

“We’ll show him, Goose,” Maverick says again.

“C’mon,” says Goose. “Loosen up. The week’s over; let’s go to the O Club tonight, how about it? Find something else to think about.”

All of the steam seems to go out of Maverick; he looks a little diminished in its wake. “Maybe, yeah.”

Goose tries again. “What about Charlie, then? How’s that going, anyway?”

Now it’s Maverick who sighs. “No dice there. Playing hard to get.”

Seems to be a pattern, thinks Goose, but knows better than to say it out loud. “Well, since you’ve got no plans, and I know better than to leave you alone on a Friday night—O Club it is! Let’s go, let’s go.”

Surely no one named Kazansky would be there tonight. Goose’s known Iceman since Annapolis, and despite appearances, Iceman isn’t much for the social scene. Being top of his class required necessary sacrifices—sacrifices like keeping his nose buried in a book when he isn’t beating everyone’s ass at literally anything else.

Alas, God hasn’t been smiling too kindly upon Goose, lately. He doesn’t groan when he sees that unmistakable blond mug next to the giant sequoia that is Slider, but it’s a damn near thing.

Maverick catches sight of him at exactly the same time. His face does some impressive gymnastics before it finally settles on something neutral. He nudges Goose, hard. “Since you insisted,” he says, with only a slightly murderous uptick to the corner of his mouth, “I’m on your tab today, buddy.”

Goose rubs his smarting bicep with a grimace. “You got it, pal.”

Iceman lifts his drink in greeting as Goose approaches the bar. Goose waves back, snatches the beers, and retreats quickly to the booth Maverick grabs for them. Unlike before, Maverick doesn’t seem interested in scouting the premises. He takes the proffered beer and sits there burning holes in the scratched wood of the table with a deep furrow between his eyebrows.

It's not a bad evening, all things considered. Not adventurous, but it doesn't need to be; they did enough adventurous shit earlier, up there in the air chasing after Jester at Mach 2 with their hair on fire. They talk Carole and Bradley, and Maverick's eyes shine like they always do when Goose really gets going—with him, Goose is always glad to share the little family he's built, always glad to fill the void Maverick has in his own life.

And if he catches Maverick's gaze drifting away sometimes, across the room to a tall blond pilot with a crystal blue ring on his finger and a pretty brunette hanging off his arm, Goose doesn't mention it.

Good God, at this rate Goose is gonna shoot himself in the eye to spare himself from witnessing any more of this.

Look. It's not that he has a problem with—insert vague gesture here—per se. As far as he's concerned, as long as you're happy, who gives a damn? And he wants to see Maverick happy, really, he does, whether it's with their beautiful bombshell instructor or their prick of a colleague with a flagpole up his ass.

But this is exorbitant. This is ridiculous. Goose's known Maverick for almost four years, now; assisting Maverick in tripping over himself in his misguided attempts to impress his newest crush is par for the course. Goose is the *best* wingman, thank you very much.

He's just—well, he's just not so sure about this one, alright? And apparently Maverick isn't, either, otherwise he would've sidled up to Iceman that very first day with a mic in hand the same way he did Charlie, his terrible singing voice notwithstanding. ...Of course, barring the fact that the Navy doesn't like shit like that.

Whatever's going on in Maverick's head doesn't stop him from staring, though. All the time. All the damn time! Goose can't even get him to make eye contact anymore if Iceman's in the room. That's Bad bad. That's Penny-Benjamin-from-three-years-ago-while-Admiral-Benjamin-sideeyes-you bad.

Goose shakes some sand off his t-shirt. The California sun's beating relentlessly down on his shoulders, the nape of his neck. The air tastes salty from the nearby beach; the faintest breeze cools the sweat on his skin, elicits a shiver. The sand is warm between his bare toes.

It kicks up again as Maverick dives for the ball. "Head in the game, Goose!"

"Right back at you!" he shouts back, because if he's here taking a second to enjoy the weather and stew in his misery, then Maverick's got his head damn well lost in the clouds.

The ball promptly flies past his face. Iceman clicks his tongue and grins, sharklike, from the other side of the net. "Eyes on the ball, Mother Goose."

"Yeah, yeah, fuck you, too," says Goose. He retrieves the ball. "C'mon, Mav, let's knock these assholes down a peg."

When Maverick doesn't respond, Goose glances behind him. "Mav?"

"Not a problem," says Maverick.

Goose tries not to roll his eyes. Maverick may be hiding behind his mirrored aviators, but Goose is close enough to see exactly where he's looking. There's no helping it. It's sunny, it's warm, they're all sweating like pigs, and everyone but Goose is shirtless and half strangled by their dogtags, Iceman included.

"Ice, c'mon!" Slider calls, his voice full of exasperation. And Iceman, too, blinks; frowns; glances one more time through the net, before he rejoins Slider at the back.

Goose stares after him. Then he looks back to Maverick. There's an unmistakable flush spreading down Maverick's chest, bright and bold like he got splattered with a tomato. Maybe it's sunburn; Maverick never uses sunscreen, even out in the middle of the ocean where the UV rays could burn a guy to a crisp.

Who's he fucking kidding, though.

Hello, operator? Yes, Goose would like to go blind, please.

"Kerner," says Goose solemnly.

Slider looks up, fork still halfway to his mouth. He seems vaguely surprised to see that Goose is alone. Goose could say the same. It's a rare day when you don't catch Slider wrapped around Iceman's neck like an overprotective octopus.

"What do *you* want?" says Slider. The spaghetti on his fork slips through the tines; Slider doesn't seem to notice.

Goose doesn't bring it up. He sets down his own tray of game hen and brussels sprouts and plops into the opposite chair so that they're face to face. Slider's features crinkle up even further. Goose chooses to ignore this, too.

He leans forward; Slider automatically leans back. "Look," Goose whispers. "You just gotta tell me I'm not crazy. RIO to RIO."

"The fuck are you on about?"

He jabs a finger forward. "Your pilot," he says. Jerks his thumb back. "And mine."

Now. Slider isn't the Iceman. Doesn't matter how many years they've flown together, how long they've known each other—Iceman is Iceman, still and blank behind his devastating smile like someone dunked his head into Lake Baikal and let his face ossify like that—and Slider is Slider, who was born in Texas and did not have his head dunked into Lake Baikal as a child, probably.

The point is, Slider's expression wavers, even though it's only for a second.

Goose waits patiently.

Slider's fork resumes its journey, still spaghetti-less. When it clinks against his teeth, he finally looks down at it. "What about them?" he says slowly.

"C'mon, man," says Goose. "You know *exactly* what I'm talking about."

Maverick and Iceman shook hands after the volleyball game. It was a very long, very sweaty, very unnecessary handshake. Goose will never be able to unsee the two of them making bedroom eyes. Never.

"So what?" Slider says, but his face is doing that Thing again.

"So you *do* see it," says Goose. He pushes his tray forward just enough so that he has room to rest his elbows on the table. "Great. Wonderful. Fantastic. Good to know I'm not hallucinating."

Slider sneers and makes to rise, even though his plate of spaghetti is still half-full. "Whatever you're talking about, I don't give a damn. Leave me alone, Bradshaw."

"Slider, my man, my brother, my guy," says Goose, stopping him with a raised, beseeching hand. "Let me ask you this. Have you had a moment of peace since we came to TOPGUN?"

Slider pauses.

"Have you had a single conversation with Kazansky in the last week that didn't involve Mav? Just once?"

Another beat.

Goose nods. "See."

Slider slumps back down on the chair. "If I have to hear one more second of Ice's bitching, I'm gonna go lay myself down on the tarmac."

Goose nods again, sagely.

"So, what?" says Slider, still suspicious. "You're saying this isn't one-sided?"

See, here's the deal. Slider's a total dickhead, but no one can say he isn't loyal as fuck to Iceman. It's a RIO thing. In the cockpit, they have their pilot's six. It tends to translate on the ground, too.

Goose looks over Slider's shoulder at the far wall. Black scuffs mar the baseboard from years of careless young sailors scraping their cheap metal chairs against the drywall. A hairline crack runs through the off-white paint.

He briefly closes his eyes. "Let's just say at this rate I might join you on the tarmac."



Slider snorts. “Sure,” he says, spinning his fork round and round in his spaghetti. “Like I haven’t noticed how badly he’s been trying to get into Blackwood’s pants. Not to mention that one admiral’s daughter.”

“Oh yeah? As if Kazansky’s all that.” Goose crosses his arms. “Strutting around with his chest puffed out like he’s God’s gift to mankind.”

Slider chews his spaghetti and points his fork at Goose. “That’s *Mr.* Kazansky to you.”

“Uh huh,” says Goose. “Slider, I’m *sure*. I know Mav.”

Slider studies him. Goose can almost see the gears churning in his big head.

“We’re still gonna win the trophy,” he says finally.

“Not if Mav’s got anything to say about it.”

“They’re gonna kill each other.”

“They’ll be fine,” says Goose.

To his credit, he only doubts it a little.

“You and Slider seem to be getting real cozy,” says Maverick, later that day. They’re the last pair in the locker room again, and Goose doesn’t believe for a second that it isn’t deliberate. Maverick doesn’t usually take ten minutes to towel himself dry.

He’s squinting a little at Goose, still a little pissed, it seems, from the earlier hop. No dumb mistakes this time, just simple old impatience. Jester got a lock on them even quicker than the day before, and because of it they slid back two points—back to their frustratingly familiar place an inch behind the ever-patient Iceman.

“Me and Kerner?” says Goose. “Noooo. You must be seeing things.”

“You ate lunch with him today. What’s that all about?”

“Well, I *have* known him since Pensacola,” says Goose. “He’s an ass, but not all that bad, really. Once you get past the crick in your neck.”

Maverick makes a dubious noise.

Goose gives his back a pat. “No one will ever replace you, Mav,” he says gravely.

“Oh, shut up,” says Maverick. He snaps his towel at Goose, embarrassed, before hanging it in his locker. “I was just curious. You know I don’t really give a shit.”

“Uh huh,” says Goose.

“So, Maverick,” says Carole. Her beautiful face is luminous in the afternoon rays drifting through the diner window, her hair like spun gold. Goose tugs her closer until she’s snug against his side; his other arm curls around Bradley, who’s playing with the tater tots on his plate. “Goose tells me a sexy blond’s caught your eye!”

Maverick’s hand pauses halfway to his mouth, his fries dripping ketchup. “Did he, now?”

“Not in those words!” Goose protests, wincing, but Carole only laughs.

“Maverick, you silly dog,” she says. “When will you learn? Goose tells me everything.”

“Do you, now.”

“Not everything!” Goose protests again. Carole pulls away just enough to gasp scandalously at him. Goose wilts. “Okay. Everything.”

“*Everything*,” says Carole. She folds her arms on the Formica tabletop, shoulders thrown forward. Pretty, demure, devilish. Under the table, her ankle hooks around Goose’s own. “Year after year of tales—how my darling angel Goose goes home early for church, but you. You always go home with someone new hanging off your arm!”

“Thank you, Goose,” says Maverick.

“It’s my pleasure,” says Goose.

“Well?” says Carole impatiently. “I wanna hear it straight outta you! Tell me about him!”

A beat. Maverick’s eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets. His fries fall, limply, back to his plate. Bradley reaches over and steals one.

“‘Him’?” Maverick says faintly. He stares at Goose, through Goose, who, slightly concerned, waves a hand in front of Maverick’s face.

“Mav? Mav.”

“What are you talking about?” He sounds breathless. Like his throat’s closed up and he can’t get enough air in his lungs. “You mean Charlie, right? You mean Charlie.”

“Er,” says Goose.

“Oh, Mav,” says Carole, softening immediately. She reaches over to touch the back of his hand and shoots Goose a side-eye. “Goose was just being Goose, you know how he is. Charlie’s that instructor, right? I hear she’s beautiful.”

Maverick doesn’t seem to hear her. Wide-eyed. Chest rising and falling, quicker and quicker. “Goose. What did you mean? What do you mean, ‘him’?”

Goose returns Carole’s side-eye. “I just meant,” he starts. Tilts his head, and considers his next words carefully. “Mav, haven’t you noticed? We never talk about Charlie anymore. She says all those things about your flying and you don’t even bat an eye.”

“She’s a civilian contractor,” says Maverick, his voice far away. He stares down at his plate. “She’s never been in the air.”

Goose pauses again. “Right. And—you know. Sometimes I see you looking. Well. More than sometimes. A lot. You really don’t know?”

Maverick only breathes harder. His hand trembles on the table.

Carole pulls away from Goose and slips into the seat next to him. Puts her own hand atop his. She laces their fingers together. “It’s okay, Pete. I’m sorry I dropped that on you so suddenly. You’re family. We love you. You know that, right?”

Maverick manages a nod. Gradually, as Carole holds on, the panic seems to subside.

Regret is tight in Goose's chest. “You okay?”

Maverick looks Goose in the face, even though his eyes twitch like he’s trying hard not to look away. “Yeah,” he says.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” says Goose.

“Yeah,” Maverick says again. He takes one more deep breath. “No, it’s okay. You’re family. I’m—I’m glad you know.” He pats Carole’s hand, weakly, gratefully. She draws him into a hug, tight and fierce as anything; he returns it with a shaky arm around her shoulders. “Is it... is it that obvious?”

“Well, truthfully...” Goose sees Bradley reach for another one of Maverick’s fries in their distraction, and quickly pulls him back. “I’ve spent almost every waking hour with you for the past four years. You can’t exactly hide anything from me.”

“Guess not.” Maverick smiles uncertainly. He still looks hunched, raw, not like *Maverick*—just Pete, who still struggles under the weight of his father’s legacy. Just Pete, who still desperately wants to prove himself to the world in which he belongs.

“Don’t worry about it, Mav,” says Goose again. “You know I don’t mind. Not as long as you’re happy.”

Maverick’s throat works. Then he nods.

“But—there is one thing.” Maverick’s spine straightens again, bracing, but Goose just shakes his head. “*Kazansky*? Really?”

Another beat. Then Maverick bursts into laughter. It sounds wild with relief, all the tension blown out of him at once. “Aren’t you the one who called him a ‘sexy blond’?”

“Not in those exact words!” Goose repeats, indignant. “Carole! Stop laughing! Why did you have to say that?”

Carole flutters her eyelashes at him. “Oh, honey, but I was just inferring it from what you told me. Tall, smart, athletic, the valedictorian of his graduating class—but don’t you worry,

darling,” she adds, when Goose sputters, “you know I only have eyes for you.”

She turns back to Maverick, pulls his arm tighter around her. Gazes up at him with pure affection in her limpid eyes. “So then—is it true? What Goose says? Is he *dreamy*?”

Goose watches in terrible fascination as Maverick turns pink. “Carole—” he stammers.

“He sounds like it,” says Carole. She tosses them both a coquettish smile. “If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t have caught *your* eye. Only the best for our Maverick.” She pats his chest where his shoulder meets his pectoral. “You’d better introduce me someday, ‘cause Goosey’s known him for years and he never bothered!”

“Honey...”

“We’re not—I don’t even know if he—” Maverick sighs, slouching into the seat, the faux leather crackling beneath his weight. Now that he’s been dragged kicking and screaming into the open, he can’t seem to string more than a few coherent words together.

Carole shares a look with Goose again. *See?* he mouths. He hates to admit it, but Maverick’s a 100%, Grade-A goner. For the fucking *Iceman*.

Then Carole—beautiful, bold Carole—asks, plain as day: “Do you like him?”

Maverick goes so red Goose actually gets a little concerned. His mouth works uselessly.

Goose leans toward Carole and mock-whispers behind his hand. “He likes him.” Maverick shoves him back; Goose laughs, long and loud.

Carole only smiles wider. She catches Maverick’s forearm as he retracts it and squeezes, gently. “Maybe you should give it a shot.”

“Carole...” Uncertainty creeps back into Maverick’s face. He doesn’t have to say anything else. All three of them know the risk, the potential repercussions.

But Goose didn’t fall for no sucker. Carole’s mouth sets, stubborn. She looks up at Maverick like for all intents and purposes she would go to war to see him happy. “Goose tells me he thinks you have a chance,” she says. “And my man may be just a silly ol’ goose, but when he tells me something like that, I believe it with all my heart.”

Maverick stares at him. “Goose?”

Goose stirs his straw in his cup, watches his Pepsi swirl in favor of confronting whatever expression Maverick is wearing. “Let me put it this way,” he says. “If I have to watch three more weeks of you two making eyes at each other, I might just claw my own eyes out.” He twists to the side and pinches Bradley’s rosy cheek. “You don’t want Daddy to go blind now, do you, Bradley?”

“No,” says Bradley dutifully.

“Hear that?” he tells Maverick. “Better take responsibility.”

Maverick's eyes are big again. Then his jaw clenches. A muscle twitches in his cheek. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Oh, I surely do," says Goose.

Maverick shakes his head. "No, it's—it's no good. It's not worth my wings."

Goose sighs heavily. Truly, it's none of his business. They're all fully grown adults here, and Maverick can take care of himself. All his bemoaning aside, Goose will suffer as much as he needs to if it means they stay in the air together.

But if Maverick plied him with enough alcohol—like, a lot—like enough to get him *really* drunk, completely and utterly hammered—Goose might (*might*) admit: Mav and Ice? Not so bad a fit.

After all, Maverick's always been like one of those too-intelligent dogs, one that needs challenge and enrichment to keep him engaged and happy. He burns hard and burns bright and doesn't wait for you to catch up, so you'd damn well better keep on his wing from the start.

Goose would gladly follow him to the ends of the earth. Would gladly blaze their way across the sky at a thousand miles per hour, whooping and hollering all the while. But at the end of the day, he's still got Carole and Bradley and the tiny, loving family they've made together to tether him to reality.

But Maverick?

One day, he might just fly so high, so far, so fast over the horizon that Goose will never see him again.

"Trust me, Mav," he says. "Take the shot."

Maverick only frowns. He doesn't meet his eyes.

The days pass, and nothing really changes, except that Maverick seems to be making a conscious effort not to stare anymore. Which is all well and good, if only he started doing that *before* Goose cottoned on to the whole thing, because otherwise he never would have noticed that it's now *Iceman* doing the staring.

What did Goose do to deserve this? How in the blue blazes is Maverick still not seeing Mr. Ice-Cold-Except-When-I'm-Eyefucking-Pete-Mitchell over there???

("I'll bet you fifty bucks they fuck by graduation," says Slider.

"That seems remarkably optimistic," says Goose glumly.)

In the end, it's fine. Maverick's made his stance clear, and Goose isn't about to be an asshole about it. They carry on through the days in lecture, in the sky, and no matter what is or isn't

going on between them, Maverick and Iceman bully their way neck-and-neck toward having his name on the TOPGUN plaque, all pointed, smarmy comments and cool, even looks.

Goose doesn't really care about the trophy anymore, to be honest. Great as it'd feel to be number one, he doesn't share the chip on Maverick's shoulder nor the overwhelming desire to prove himself. He's already proved himself to everyone who matters to him.

Maybe that's what it is, for Maverick. Maybe somewhere along the way, the Navy's approval became synonymous with Iceman's approval, because everyone knows Iceman is the best of them.

In any case, nothing changes.

Not until they're forced to eject.

Goose first wakes in a haze of confusion, body numb, vision muddled—but before he can make sense of the swirl of colors or the incessant beeping all around him, he sinks swiftly back into nothingness.

When he wakes again, Carole is sitting next to him, one of his hands gripped tightly in both of her own.

"Oh," he mumbles. "Hi, honey."

Carole bursts into tears. "Hi."

Alarm breaks through his mental fog. "Hey. Hey? Are you okay? What happened?"

"Oh, you idiot," says Carole. "You're all banged up. Mav says you got into a spin, so you had to eject." She squeezes his hand, then wipes her tears with the collar of her shirt. "You broke your *neck*, Goosey. The doctor says there's no nerve damage, that you're super lucky. He says you'll make a full recovery—but God, you scared me and Mav half to death."

Oh. That explains why he can't turn his head. Also, the hospital bed. "Mav?"

"He's okay," says Carole. Another tear slips down her cheek. Goose wants to wipe it away, but his hand feels like a brick on the bed. "Just a couple of bruises and some muscle sprains. But he must be frantic—they didn't let him in, you know. I'll call the doctor and then go tell him you're awake, okay? I'm so glad you're awake. Thank you for waking up, Goosey."

Goose smiles drowsily. Pats her hand with no small effort. "'Course, sweetheart. Would never leave you behind."

Later, the doctor will enter and give him a rundown of exactly which parts of his neck he broke. Later, Maverick will barrel through the door, shadows under his eyes and his hair a greasy disaster, like he hasn't slept or showered in three days straight. He'll collapse in the visitor's chair with its hideously speckled cushions and try valiantly not to break down mid-apology, and both of them will ignore the way his voice cracks halfway through. Goose will

tell him it's okay, because of course it's okay—*It was an accident, alright, Mav? Don't worry, I'll be cleared to fly again before you know it*—and Maverick will duck his head, eyes glassy, fists clenched tight over his knees.

Goose will apologize, too, because now that he's stuck to a bed with what looks like a giant PVC pipe around his neck, Maverick is short a RIO, and there's less than two weeks left to earn the TOPGUN trophy. Maverick's eyes will flicker to the scuffed, vinyl floor, and he'll say, soft and subdued, "Don't be silly, Goose."

But that's later. Now, Carole will lean over and press a featherlight kiss to his forehead, and set those events into motion.

Of all the people to visit him while he's stuck in Medical, Iceman is one of the last he expects. Only Slider ranks lower. Not for any specific reason, really; just that Iceman doesn't look like a guy who doles out well wishes and get-well cards. Maybe Goose shouldn't be so surprised. Even the grizzled Viper and Jester found time to stop by and express their sympathies earlier.

"Hey, Tom," says Goose. "Are you gonna come in or do you intend to become one with the door?"

Iceman rolls his eyes and enters. He doesn't pull over the rickety chair everyone else uses; elects instead to remain standing, his spine stiff and straight in his service khakis. "Hey, Goose. How're you holding up?" he says, and takes in Goose's prone form with something quiet behind his eyes.

"Well, my beard keeps growing in and ruining my mustache, and now I can't shave it," says Goose. "Does that answer your question?"

Iceman smiles at that—that same smile that Goose witnessed break many a heart back at the Academy. He glances around the room. It's unimpressively bare; just Goose, the bed, and the hideously speckled chair. "How long are they keeping you here?"

"Just one more day, I hope," says Goose. "Since I'm not totally broken, I'm praying to every God I've ever heard of that they'll clear me so I can stare at the ceiling at home instead."

"That's good," says Iceman. Then he turns back to Goose, face suddenly gone serious. "Look. I wanted to apologize."

Goose *really* wishes he could turn his head. "Whatever the hell for?"

"I took it too far," says Iceman. His hands fold behind his back in a loose semblance of parade rest. "The hop that day. I could've taken the shot, but I didn't. Maybe if I had, Maverick wouldn't have gotten too close. I'm sorry."

Goose sighs. "Water under the bridge. It wasn't your fault; shit happens. I've got enough on my plate trying to stop Mav from beating himself up—for God's sake, I can't deal with you,

too.”

“Maverick,” says Iceman. There’s something about the way he says it that draws Goose’s gaze back to him; it’s reserved, reluctant. Almost disappointed. “They assigned him Sundown, did he tell you?”

He did, but that was all he told Goose. Maverick didn’t like talking about TOPGUN, anymore. “Spill, Kazansky,” says Goose. “How’re the rankings?”

Iceman gives him a level look, and Goose feels a stone settle in his stomach. He already knows what Iceman’s going to say before he opens his mouth. “Slider and I are in the lead. Maverick didn’t even show up today.”

Goose groans.

“He can’t get his head back in the game,” Iceman continues. “He’s been overcompensating.”

“Goddamn it, Mav.” If Goose could put his face in his hands, he would. He raises his hands to his face instead, but it’s not the same. “Well. Congratulations on being Top Gun, I guess.”

“There’s still a few days left,” Iceman replies smoothly. Goose doesn’t bother responding; they both know that without Maverick out there, burning on the wind and indomitable and fearless, the winner is all but decided.

“I can’t believe it,” says Goose, after a beat of silence. “After all that. I’m fine, okay? It wasn’t his fault. I’ll be back in the air before all of you know it. Damn it—he can still do it without me. He knows that, right?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” says Iceman quietly.

Goose deflates. “I know. I just hate it. I don’t blame him at all. And I don’t blame you, either. It comes with the job. Surprise, something bad might happen when you’re betting your life on a multi-million dollar death machine.”

“It’s just never happened to you before.”

“It’s just never happened to us before,” Goose agrees, and sighs. “I can’t see Maverick quit. He was so excited to be here. He wanted that trophy so bad.”

“I know,” says Iceman. “I get it.”

“I can’t even leave to go shake some sense into him. Do you know how much it sucks waiting for everyone to come to me, instead?”

Abruptly, realization strikes him.

“Wait,” he says. He raises his arm, stiff and jerky like Frankenstein—curse the godforsaken collar around his neck. He points at Iceman. “You. I can’t, but you can.”

“Me?” Iceman’s eyebrows shoot up. “What do you expect *me* to do?”



“I don’t know,” says Goose. “But I bet he’ll listen to you.”

For that, he receives an incredulous laugh. “Are you on meds?” Iceman says. “You’ve seen us these past few weeks. What the hell makes you say that?”

“Yeah, they give me the good stuff—hold on. Don’t distract me.” Goose lowers his arm because it’s already beginning to ache. Shit. He hates being incapacitated. “Here’s the thing, Kazansky. I have eyes. I use my eyes. I’ve been using my eyes since day one, and Maverick? Isn’t subtle.”

The amusement fades from Iceman’s face. He opens his mouth, but Goose beats him to the punch. Says, “And neither are you, for that matter”—and watches with what definitely feels like validation as the Iceman goes ice-white.

“What.”

“Just ask Slider.”

“*What?*”

“Iceman, my man. Don’t overthink it,” says Goose. “Just go do it.”

“Goose, you’re crazy,” says Iceman. Breathes out.

“I think I’m allowed to be,” says Goose, raising his hand just enough to point, pointedly, at his neck. He throws Iceman his best no-nonsense stare, which is more challenging than it needs to be because Iceman is still standing close to the door and again, Goose can’t turn his fucking head to meet his eyes. “Tom. I swear on my honor as the #1 Dad in the Navy and also the World—you’ve got nothing to lose. Just go talk to him. For me. Please?”

Iceman scrutinizes him for a long, fathomless moment. It’s unnerving, that stare; still and inexorable as a mountain. Like getting picked apart one fragment at a time, like getting turned ‘round and ‘round in Iceman’s hands till he finds what he’s looking for. Goose would be more wound up about it, but as it happens, he lost a lot of fucks after breaking his neck.

Iceman eventually seems to come to a decision. Without further fanfare, he turns on his heel and heads out the door. “Get well soon, Mother Goose.”

“Thanks!” Goose calls after him.

Unfortunately (Wait, no. Fortunately), Goose isn’t privy to what happens after; only that Maverick does return to the air, and the only reason why he finds that out is because three days after Goose is cleared to go home, he opens his front door to see Viper standing on his doorstep.

Also, apparently, even though Goose has barely done more than watch television and piss for a week and a half, he’s still racked up enough points to graduate the program.

It's a no brainer, then, to go to graduation. To have Carole and Maverick help him into his crisply ironed dress whites and ensure every button shines and every crease is sharp.

Maverick is only a little subdued as he brushes a ball of lint off Goose's shoulder; he's not apologizing anymore, at least, which is definitely progress. They exchange grins as Carole shakes the keys to Goose's rental car in her hand, Bradley in her other arm, shouting for her two ladies to hurry it up.

"That's you," says Goose.

Maverick punches his upper arm, very, very gently. "Shut up," he says fondly. "C'mon, let's go."

They should've made it peacefully down the hallway to the front door. They should've made it calmly and uneventfully to the graduation ceremony—yelling only when Carole almost runs a red light—and then, when they finally get to the venue, Goose should've sat down with the rest of the class and should've been a good sport and should've extended formal congratulations to Iceman and Slider for finally netting the coveted trophy.

That's what should've happened. What really happens is that Maverick turns around to leave first, and Goose glimpses an unmistakable red-violet bruise peek out over the edge of his collar.

"Mav!"

Maverick spins around, his worry instantaneous. "What? What is it?"

Goose's eyes feel ready to pop out of his head—and wouldn't that just be the icing on the cake to the past nine weeks of his life. He spins Maverick firmly back around and jabs a finger into his neck. "What's this? What is *this*! Is this what I think it is? Maverick!"

Maverick knocks Goose's finger off and slaps a hand over his nape. His mouth twitches in a brave attempt to remain nonchalant, but his brilliant red ears give him away. "It's not a big deal."

No way is Goose gonna have that. He reaches out and yanks Maverick's collar down lower—Maverick yelps—"Goose, my uniform!"—they struggle for a few seconds—would have struggled much longer, he's sure, if Maverick wasn't being so conscientious of Goose's injury.

"Jesus, Mav." Goose gapes. There's a whole constellation of berry-red bruises mottling the base of Maverick's throat, all the way down to his collarbone. "Did you let him *maul* you?"

"Goose."

"What?" Goose demands. "I'm right, aren't I? Are you gonna tell me *Charlie* did this?"

"I—no, of course not."

“Boys!” Carole appears in the doorway in her peach sundress, her hands on her hips. “What on earth is taking you so long? My grandma gets ready faster than—” Her gaze falls on Maverick’s open collar, and her face goes slack with shock.

“Honey,” says Goose, full of despair. “Maverick got *eaten*.”

“Hi,” says Maverick weakly. He tries clumsily to reclip his buttons, glaring at Goose all the while. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

Carole’s eyes sparkle. She quickly strides forward and helps him straighten his lapels, tugs his collar just a little bit higher so the topmost offending mark disappears under the stiff material. Maverick watches her warily.

Rightfully so. “So,” she says. “Was he good?”

“*Carole!*”

Carole giggles. “Aw, Mav, you big stud. I’m happy for you!”

“And I’m filled with a lifetime of regret,” says Goose, staring ahead a thousand miles away. “Did I ever want to imagine Iceman Kazansky chewing on your neck? No. Never in my life. Is that what I got? Yes. Why?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” says Carole. “You wanted this for him, remember?”

“Clearly I didn’t think it through.”

Also, he owes Slider fifty dollars. Ain’t that just lovely.

“Let’s just go,” says Maverick hastily, trying halfheartedly to push them out the door. “Aren’t we gonna be late?”

Regardless, they make it just in time. Once Maverick carefully helps Goose out of the car, Carole blows them both kisses and shoots Maverick a wink before driving off with Bradley. They reach their seats, and Maverick hovers closely as Goose fields well-wishes and congratulatory pats on the shoulder from classmates he hasn’t seen in two weeks. Then they settle down.

If there’s one thing Goose didn’t miss while out of commission, it was the speeches. CO after CO takes to the stage, and Goose lets his brain glaze over. He focuses instead on the hot sun baking down on them, on the way Maverick shifts, bored and uncomfortable, next to him.

An eternity later, Iceman and Slider take the trophy. Hands are shaken, photos are snapped, and it’s like everyone releases a simultaneous breath of relief. It’s over.

Goose follows Maverick up to the front. Whether it’s because it’s Maverick heading for Iceman, or Goose trailing behind him with a big-ass, in-your-face cervical collar, their class parts for them as easily as a knife through butter.

They all gather around to watch as Maverick extends his hand. “Congratulations,” he says.

And oh, oh God. Is that Iceman? Smiling fondly? Goose doesn't want to be able to read Iceman's smiles, for fuck's sake. That's not information he's ready to handle.

He averts his eyes—he has to do it with his whole upper body, now, which is just plain awkward—and unintentionally catches Slider's gaze instead. Slider looks both tired and mildly constipated. Three cheers for RIO solidarity, he supposes.

Maverick turns to Slider himself; congratulates him, too. Slider accepts it, and once everyone's fanned out, mingling around the tables and too busy talking and snacking and laughing to overhear, Slider looks at Goose, and says, very flatly, "I'm going to kill you."

Goose blinks. "Come again?"

"Also, you owe me fifty bucks."

"I know," says Goose. "Can we please circle back to 'I'm going to kill you'?"

"Wait. You know?"

"Yeah." Goose grimaces. "I saw the marks. You sure that's what it was, though?"

Slider scowls. Every deep, dark line of his face screams of exhaustion. "I sure as fuck do. You're goddamn lucky you got a one-bedroom assignment, Bradshaw. All that fucking thumping—I didn't sleep a wink last night."

Goose considers this for a long moment. "I'll write you a check," he says, finally.

Not long after the party is interrupted with new orders, Goose makes his way into the nearest facility in search of a latrine. He moves slowly through the hallways, one after another, all the same off-white wall color and shiny LVT flooring—which genius designed this place, anyway?—and ultimately finds himself standing at the foot of a staircase, lost and confused.

Fortunately, a pair of E-3s pass him by, and, after exchanging salutes, they point him in the right direction.

The restroom signage has just entered his line of sight when he hears a pair of hushed voices around the corner. Normally, he wouldn't even notice, but after years of being at Maverick's side—years of focusing on his voice through the comms when clear communication meant the difference between life and death—Goose can recognize his voice anywhere.

He glances around the corner, and sure enough, there's Maverick, leaning back against the wall in some manner of discussion with Iceman. They're close but not touching, the toes of their shined shoes a couple inches apart, so that's fine, not obvious.

But then Maverick looks up, and Goose is struck with a sharp sense of déjà vu—for that time in the O Club, all those weeks ago. For the low lights and the crystal clink of glasses, Iceman in Maverick's space, all broad shoulders and predatory grace. For the two of them, wielding their smiles at each other like knives.

Then Goose blinks and the memory melts away.

Maverick is smiling now, too. It's crooked-toothed and crinkly-eyed, so wide and so heartbreakingly genuine it makes Goose's cheeks hurt just looking at him. Another blink, and Iceman's hand is suddenly there, cradling Maverick's jaw, his thumb stroking tenderly over the corner of that grin like it's helpless not to.

They sure chose a shitty place to rendezvous. Briefly, Goose considers stomping his foot, clearing his throat. Some kind of interruption, because isn't this what Maverick was afraid of? He gazes forlornly at the restroom down the corridor, so close and yet so far away.

Instead, he settles back to wait.

He'll give them a moment. He doesn't mind.

## End Notes

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